

How to Talk to Someone About Why Democracy Is Important

When Americans think of democracy, we think of our system of government. But democracy is more than just the relationship between citizens and their government; it is also the relationship between individual citizens and the population they comprise.

The idea that “we the people” select our political leaders and vote on important issues speaks to a common idea: self-government. Under American democracy, each citizen should have a voice that carries equal weight and equal responsibility in setting our course as a country. The concept of American democracy encompasses both a functioning system of government that is able to make progress on shared concerns, and a culture where all people feel a sense of belonging and commitment to each other and to their nation.

Right now, Americans feel our democracy is under pressure: 45% are not satisfied with how democracy is currently working in the United States. However, 8 in 10 Americans feel that while democracy is imperfect, it is still preferable to other forms of government. The majority of Americans say it is important to live in a democratic country, with 52% saying it is absolutely important.

As we navigate a contentious presidential election, it is critical that we talk with one another about our shared concerns and hopes for the future of our democracy. We wrote this discussion guide to help you talk to others about what’s at stake, and how to come together.

Commonly Asked Questions About Why Democracy Is Important

1. What Does a Successful Democracy Look Like in the U.S.?

Right now, Americans feel inundated with headlines, political ads, and social media posts that highlight conflict and division. It is understandable that many Americans struggle at times to picture what a successful democracy looks like.

DISCUSSION TIPS

- When talking with others about why it is vital to take action, it's important to **articulate an aspirational vision for our democracy** and talk about our systems of government. A successful American democracy implies a society in which: institutions function according to U.S. laws, citizens' rights are protected, and all Americans are committed to upholding the Constitution and participating in our democratic processes.
- We also need to **communicate what a successful democracy feels like at the individual level**. An effective democracy allows people to feel like they belong in our society. Democracy also empowers people to feel safe to freely express themselves, and to engage with diverse or even opposing viewpoints. It means trusting that your representatives — even if they are not the politicians you voted for — have your best interests at heart. Our personal views will not always be represented in policy, but having opposing opinions and debates is integral to a robust democratic culture.

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2. Is Democracy Broken? Can Democracy Still Work?

82% of Americans say the country feels more divided than unified. The two main political parties in the U.S. seem at odds on every issue — including what democracy actually means. When talking with a person who is frustrated by this division, and who may be starting to lose faith in our democracy, it is important to acknowledge that this perspective is shared by many Americans across the political spectrum.

83% of Americans feel that pitting Americans against each other is a threat to our democracy, and almost half of Americans surveyed (45%) are not satisfied with the way democracy is working in the U.S. right now. This dissatisfaction often stems from low trust in American government and politicians, as well as a sense of disconnection from local communities.

Even amid this sense of division, Americans of all backgrounds still have deep faith in our democracy and feel that it is not broken. We can address any challenges we face by working within our democratic systems and institutions, as they remain resilient and up to the task.

DISCUSSION TIPS

- **Ask about people's experiences of democracy at the local level.** Our neighborhoods and communities are where we see democracy in practice. Though Americans cite divisions at the national level, a majority feel that their local community has more in common than what divides them. 56% of Americans say that within their community, people with different views treat each other with respect. 77% say that people are able to advocate for a range of ideas, including those that the majority might strongly disagree with.
- **Talk about specific instances of civic engagement at the local level.** 90% of Americans say they felt good about their most recent voting experience. It's also helpful to focus on smaller, oft-overlooked democratic actions, such as community events that bring people together and interpersonal acts of generosity and kindness.

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- **Discuss democratic rights and responsibilities.** Most Americans feel strongly about our essential rights — voting, free speech, freedom of association, etc. — and critical responsibilities: civic engagement and respecting other people’s perspectives. By elevating both rights and responsibilities in your conversation (ex. the right to vote as well as the responsibility to vote), you will likely discover areas of common agreement.
- **Emphasize the capacity our democracy has to bring about change when Americans engage with it.** At a time when 79% of Americans say they feel frustrated by the state of the country, it is important to acknowledge the authenticity behind someone’s concerns about the health of our democracy. This sense of concern about the country can be a commonality we harness to then emphasize how resilient our democracy is and how it has the capacity to change for the better when we involve ourselves in it.

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3. Is Democracy Serving Everyone Equally?

Around 1 in 3 Americans do not feel as though they are part of a community where people understand, care for, and help each other. 28% of Americans feel unable to live safely in the U.S., and do not feel protected. When talking with other Americans about our democracy, it is not uncommon to hear something along the lines of: “It doesn’t seem democracy is working for people like me right now.”

Given people’s anxieties about COVID-19, unemployment, the economy, and racial injustice, among other considerations, it is important to treat these concerns seriously and ask questions about them. Each person’s concerns will be unique, even if they speak to broader societal sentiments of anxiety, frustration, and fear.

Discussion Tips

- Don’t minimize or try to persuade the person by suggesting their concerns may be misplaced, but do **emphasize a shared community**. Perhaps you live in the same neighborhood or city, or are part of the same faith group, school, industry, or online community. Discuss the ways your community is committed to a democracy that serves everyone equally.
- **Speak to how your shared engagement with our democracy will make it work better for all Americans.** Most Americans (87%) say it is important to live in a democratic country. Moreover, 79% of Americans feel that they can change society through their actions, and recognize that change is made through a combination of the electoral process and activism. Engage people in conversation by speaking to these common beliefs.
- **Communicate that being civically and collectively engaged — regardless of politics — is the simplest and most powerful way to improve our democracy.**

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4. Why Do We Need to Strengthen Our Democracy?

We need to strengthen our democracy to protect our rights and freedoms, and to ensure that future generations of Americans enjoy even greater measures of liberty, equality, and opportunity. Democracy is an active, living aspect of American culture — one that is significantly threatened if we let our guards down, disconnect, or become complacent. Americans currently feel deeply divided, and intense partisan polarization threatens to further pull us apart.

Still, there is agreement across political differences on the importance of sustaining our democracy. Working to strengthen our democracy is a way to bring Americans together across partisan lines, and heal some of the divisions evident throughout the country.

DISCUSSION TIPS

- **Appeal to shared American values.** Democracy is not the default system in any country. America's founders worked to establish democracy, and subsequent generations have fought to strengthen and protect it. Liberty and equality, values integral to democracy, are what Americans believe to be most important for an ideal society to embody. Americans recognize the importance of a democratic culture, with the majority saying it is absolutely important to live in a democracy.
- **Appeal to a shared responsibility.** 80% of Americans say they vote in part to honor people who fought for their right to vote. If we stop participating in civic activities, stop caring about others because they hold different views, or disengage from critical issues that may be difficult to tackle, we do not gain more agency or power. Rather, we chip away at democracy and risk losing things we all hold dear.
- **Emphasize that our democracy is more important than our political affiliation.** 71% of Americans agree it is more important to come together as a country after the election than to challenge the result — even if their candidate for president loses. Democracy will always be bigger than any one candidate, party, or election. The everyday work of democracy is in remaining civically engaged with our fellow Americans.

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5. What Is My Role Within a Democracy? Why Does This Matter and How Does It Impact Me?

Democracy allows us to freely express our thoughts in public; protest and lobby our representatives to change policies we disagree with; and cast our votes safely, with a sense of trust that the results will accurately reflect the will of the people. Your role is the most crucial one: to work to ensure you continue to live with these freedoms. The fortunate truth is that simple actions are enough to do your part.

DISCUSSION TIPS

- **Start local.** Reach out to your neighbors and local communities to engage and find common ground with others, even when you don't agree with their views. Fulfill your civic duty to vote in local and national elections, and encourage others to do so, too.
- **Make connections between local action and broader American concerns.** We are all part of this democracy, and our communities are interconnected and interdependent. What happens in our neighborhoods is ultimately what happens nationally. The more people come together at the local level, the more power we have to effect positive change on the country at large.